From Warrant to Imagination: An Un-noticed Aspect of *BEM*

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After nearly forty years it is hard to re-capture the excitement that greeted the publication of *Baptism, Eucharist Ministry* in 1982.[1] Here was a document that did not avoid the thorny issues that caused the sixteenth-century rupture, but sought to create a larger context in which all our issues, particularly as western Christians, could be debated. Given that the climate within the Roman Catholic Church has since turned much colder on ecumenical discussion since then, especially on eucharist and ministry, it is hard to credit that this document was set for discussion by the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales by their clergy at the monthly deanery meetings. Everyone was to buy a copy and then discuss its implications. I well recall the discussion with almost all present finding it a convenient summary of what they understood to be the acceptable breadth of Catholic tradition and only one voice dissenting in terms of a general suspicion of ecumenical dialogue.[2] Today, despite the fact that it is as relevant an issue as then, most clergy have forgotten *BEM*.[3] However, there is good news for those working for ecumenism in the wake of *BEM* in that many of the notions that first came to prominence in it are now widely accepted among the major churches as not being problematic. Most of these shifts have concerned positive elements of how churches have presented their understanding of baptism, or the eucharist, or ministry, but

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[1] *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry: Faith and Order Paper 111* (World Council of Churches, Geneva 1982); hereafter cited as *BEM*.

[2] Personal recollection of a deanery meeting of Roman Catholic clergy in the Diocese of Arundel and Brighton in early 1984.

[3] I have asked about it at several clergy in-service training days and on this limited an un-scientific basis have come to the conclusion that it is now forgotten: I would love to be disproved, but the *onus probandi* is on those who would argue that it is still part of our active consciousness.

there are also more subtle shifts in theological perspective and it is one of these that is the concern of this paper.

In quest of valid warrants

One of the implicit dividing lines between the churches for most of the last 500 years has concerned the relationship between what they do – an action in the present time – and what they read in 'the Bible' / 'the scriptures' which is imagined as authorising the action. Thus an action that is apparently not authorised or not explicitly authorised can be no more than a custom (and so have a status ranging from a vanity of human invention to something of catechetical value but lacking any mandate or obligatory force). By contrast, anything that is of universal obligatory force – which might be variously labelled as a 'sacrament,' an 'ordinance' or an 'institution' – must have very explicit foundations and instructions as to its necessity of execution. It must have, in the venerable Anglican phrase, 'the surest warrants of scripture.'

Thus for many Reformed churches there are but two sacraments – always assuming that in a scholasticism-inspired world that '*sacramenta*' are distinct objects and so can be counted – because only baptism and the eucharist pass the test of having the surest warrants of authorisation. Hence these two 'events' had stand apart from any other action of the churches (even if there were other sacraments) and only in relation to them could demands be made upon the Christian conscience. So the evangelical commands in the plural, in the *ipsissima verbi Christi*, of Mt 28:19 and Lk 22:19[4] were 'the gold standard' in any discussion of

[4] This latter reference is anything but secure for 'the long text' of Luke at this point is a conflation of various texts with the addition of 'the mandate' from 1 Cor 11:25 (see T. O'Loughlin, 'One or two cups? The Text of Luke 22:17-20 Again' in H.A.G. Houghton ed., *The Liturgy and the Living Text of the New Testament: Papers from the Tenth Birmingham Colloquium on the Textual Criticism of the New Testament* [Studies in Honour of D.C. Parker], (Gorgias Press, Piscataway, NJ, 2018), 51-69). Moreover, it seems that it was the need to preserve this

sacraments and sacramentality. Indeed, assuming this standard generated an ancillary discussion about footwashing: here *ipsissima verba Christi* were, if anything, even more explicit (Jn 13:14 So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet [ὑμεῖς ὀφείλετε ἀλλήλων νίπτειν τοὺς πόδας]). The question was whether this was a third (or an eighth) sacrament, but since there was no ecclesial actuality in need of such a warrant, it became, and remains, and academic discussion.[5]

This interest in 'biblical warrants' does not, in itself, merit much comment because it is such a well-known theme in Reformation theology, but the assumptions inherent in the appeal are far less often noted. The fundamental assumption is that there is a logical priority for the warrant over the practice. The latter only has existence in so far as it is the effect of its cause: the biblical warrant. Since this warrant is located within the body of the text and the text is a record of the moment in the life of Jesus, the warrant also has an historical priority. Practice is subsequent to word, and as such must be viewed as a manifestation of word. Practice does not have any separate ecclesial existence: quite literally, from the very first person baptised by the apostles, that act was a carrying out of a command authorising and demanding that action. Since the practice is an effect, little or no value lies in the study of the practice in terms of religiously significant knowledge – this alone can be found by understanding what is contained in the biblical authorisation.

'evangelical warrant' that led to the need to create a complex hypothesis of many cups in the pre-seder Passover, far beyond our first-century evidence, and so we have this ironical situation: an actual ecclesial liturgical need generating the biblical warrants to underpin it!

[5] See, John C. Thomas, *Footwashing in John 13 and the Johannine Community* (Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield,1991); and cf. F.D. Macchia, 'Is Footwashing the Neglected Sacrament? A Theological Response to John Christopher Thomas,' *Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies* 19(1997)239-49.

At this point we encounter yet another assumption: the biblical books are sufficient for our theological understanding of the practices which they mandate. So, if I want to know the correct, i.e. biblical, understanding of baptism, I should turn to the scriptures, and in particular the New Testament, for this is where this information is made available to the church. There may be other elements I value, or interpretations I employ, but these cannot be considered part of the necessary doctrine: that which is needed is found in the mandating source. Moreover, if this constitutes the theology that is binding, I must assume not only its sufficiency but that it is all of a piece. This means that all the references to baptism, for example, must hold together for they proceed from a single authority (the scriptures) and so must be capable of being combined into the doctrinal edifice on which the church must take its stand. Here, historically, was not only the great all consuming swamp of early modern theology, but the rationale for the theological enterprise. Since all the protagonists, including the Catholics, held that the scriptures, as truth, had to be consistent, but no theological edifice had a consistency that was immune to attack, there was no end – and from our perspective we can see that there could be no end – of ways of seeking to combine all 'the *data*.' The result, again taking baptism as an example, was that the battle lines over what baptism effected, how it effected that effect, how it was related to other causalities (e.g. the Cross), and on-going implications of the effect shifted back and forth: each generation in each group hoping to gain that little extra insight that would lead to the whole problem being solved. In assuming the consistent comprehensiveness or their source, they committed themselves to a theological demand far more embracing than any of the points of Christian faith upon which they were focussed in the moment of controversy.[6]

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[6] See Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Divisions in Christianity: The Contribution of "Appeals to Antiquity"' in S. Oliver, K. Kilby, and T. O'Loughlin eds, *Faithful Reading: New Essays in Theology and Philosophy in Honour of Fergus Kerr OP* (T. & T. Clark, London 2012), 221-41.

Implied in these assumptions, and then cohering with them, was an obfuscation of the nature of their appeal to the scriptures: that it was conduced as a legal enquiry. It is not accidental that in English the terminology used was not that of 'origins' but of 'warrants' (i.e. a document, in writing, from a sovereign to an officer authorising the performance of an act). Since it was an authority, there was little problem in viewing the bible as a legal document that contained evidence of legal precedents which could be cited in a case. The effect was to prove that an action was not a novelty, and, by so doing justifying it as necessary. We might find this legal hermeneutic almost risible – and it is certainly naïve in comparison with the reading strategies of most contemporary churches – but it was also the dominant hermeneutic of ritual at the time. As such, the biblical reader and the liturgical performer were 'on one hymn-sheet' with the doctrinal investigator. One could know all that one needed to know (doctrine) about what one was actually effecting in a ritual (liturgy) and also know that one was authorised and commanded to do exactly that (biblical exegesis).

Roman Catholics sometimes look with a certain pride at the detailed search for 'biblical warrants' that could be found in Reformed theologians until well into the twentieth century. By contrast with those theologians, the Catholics are pleased that they live within a 'tradition' and as such are saved from an endless pursuit of details in ancient books which might authorise or veto some practice. Such pride is seriously misplaced. The Council of Trent, following a much longer legal-theological tradition, insisted that each sacrament was '*a Christo Domino nostro institutum*.'[7] This insistence committed them to the very same quest (with the exception that the authorising moment might be less explicit) and, equally, it committed them to the legal quest for the

[7] For example: Canon 1 on Extreme Unction (Session 14) demanded assent to this institution by the Christ, and that it was 'promulgated' (note the legal expression) by the Apostle James (*a beato Iacobo Apostolo promulgatum*); see Denzinger-Schönmetzger, n. 1716. Similar declarations can be found for all the other sacraments.

complete and consistent theology: the *datum*, which preceded practice.[8] Thus, the moment of 'the institution' of the Eucharist – in whichever textual authority one chose to cite – was the all-important underpinning for the action of the celebrant. This instituting act had both ontological and historical priority, it was 'recalled' by the evangelists and 'repeated' by Paul.[9] The legal hermeneutic was likewise common – and arguably is still alive today[10] - as was the expectation that the whole of the theological edifice was available to any theologian sufficiently skilled to explore it. In only one detail did the two great divisions of the Latin church differ: actually finding the evidence for the institution 'from the Christ' was a more complex historical activity. We see this today in the fact that Denzinger-Schönmetzger now places the biblical 'bases' of Trent's claims in italics within square brackets: the editors apparently simply making explicit what is implicit in the text;[11] while doctrinal textbooks until the 1950s bristled with patristic references when these were deemed suitable as

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[8] That this hermeneutic is still operative within Roman Catholic thinking one needs only to look at the Vatican commission on the possibility of ordaining women to the diaconate which focussed on whether they could find an historical precedent for the practice. This commission, in 2019, failed in its object, and it was announced at Easter 2020 that yet another such commission was being established: they are not enquiring as historians into the history of the early churches, but as canonists searching for a precedent in a legal *casus*.

[9] See Session 13 on the Eucharist: ... *hoc ... sacramentum in ultima Coena Redemptorem ... instituisse ... disertis ac perspicuis verbis testatus est; quae verba a sanctis Evangelistis commemorata, et a divo Paulo postea repetita* ... (DS 1637).

[10] Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Sacramental Languages and Intercommunion: identifying a source of tension between the Catholic and the Reformed churches,' *Studia Liturgica* 47(2017)138-50.

[11] For example, after *memorata* (DS 1637) the editors have inserted: [*Mt 26, 26 ss; Mc 14, 22 ss; Lc 22, 19 s*]; and after *repetita* they have: [*1 Cor 11, 23 ss*]. In the case of Extreme Unction they have inserted: [*cf. Mc 6, 13*] after *a Christo ... institutum* (DS 1716).

evidence.[12] Furthermore, it would be naïve to imagine that this quest to use the past as a direct authorisation for the present is not still a very active concern for many Catholics.[13]

Turning to BEM

When we open the chapter in *BEM* on baptism, recalling this long quarrel over biblical sources, our hearts might sink when it too begins by laying out the biblical evidence in what is an extended form (eleven New Testament references forming the opening statement of the chapter) given that it is such a short document. On the other hand, this is precisely what many readers of the document wanted, and indeed would still want: let us start with the basics and set out the case from the high ground of the bible. But while all the texts famous from over four hundred years of inter-church disputes about baptism are there,[14] *BEM* also uses these within a completely new hermeneutic of the problem

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[12] For example, the *Didache* was often not deemed suitable as it was less than explicit on eucharistic essentials such 'the *verba*' or the need for these to be uttered by a priest (cf. Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Reactions to the *Didache* in Early Twentieth-century Britain: A Dispute over the Relationship of History and Doctrine?' in S.J. Brown, F. Knight, and J. Morgan-Guy eds, *Religion, Identity and Conflict in Britain: From the Restoration to the Twentieth Century. Essays in Honour of Keith Robbins* (Ashgate, Farnham 2013), 177-94.); while many running battles about dating texts, most famously the letters of Ignatius of Antioch gained their potency from the importance of the texts as sufficiently early evidence to act as doctrinal 'warrants' in these confessional disputes (see Alan Ford, *James Ussher: Theology, History, and Politics in Early-Modern Ireland and England* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007), 237-41 and 254-5; and cf. T.D. Barnes, 'The Date of Ignatius,' *Expository Times* 120(2008)119-30).

[13] One has but to look at the way the references are used in many passages in the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church* to see this approach to history at work.

[14] Baptism is, for instance, understood as a removal of sin (*BEM* cites 1 Cor 6:11); and baptism is understood as a new birth (*BEM* cites Jn 3:5): both biblical quotations have a long history in ecclesial conflict.

and a different strategy for observing theological debate. The whole opening paragraph deserves to be read afresh:

> Baptism is the sign of new life through Jesus Christ. It unites the one baptized with Christ and with his people. The New Testament scriptures and the liturgy of the Church unfold the meaning of baptism in various images which express the riches of Christ and the gifts of his salvation. These images are some- times linked with the symbolic uses of water in the Old Testament. Baptism is participation in Christ's death and resurrection (Rom. 6:3–5; Col. 2:12); a washing away of sin (I Cor. 6:11); a new birth (John3:5); an enlightenment by Christ (Eph. 5:14); a re- clothing in Christ (Gal. 3:27); a renewal by the Spirit (Titus 3:5); the experience of salvation from the flood (I Peter 3:20–21); an exodus from bondage (I Cor. 10:1–2) and a liberation into a new humanity in which barriers of division whether of sex or race or social status are transcended (Gal. 3:27-28; I Cor. 12:13). The images are many but the reality is one.

We can see this as marking a significant departure from the previous theological style using a set of interlocking themes.

A theological hermeneutic

There is an assumption at work throughout the passage that our theology – it is *ours* rather than being a description of the divinely revealed corpus of doctrine – is always less that the reality, in this case baptism, that we are seeking to comprehend. If this is true of all we say about a mystery, it must equally be true of all that we quarrel about in relation to baptism. Only when we know that we have all the available evidence can we argue about who is correct / incorrect, orthodox / heterodox, faithful / unfaithful to the revelation using such basics of human argument as the Law of Contradiction. But if the mystery is greater than the images – and this is demonstrated by there being a multiplicity of images – then while we can argue for the utility of one over another, we might rank them in terms of their significance, and we might find one theology better than another, we must be very slow to rule any potential addition to our understanding as wrong or heretical.

In this scenario, theologians find themselves seeking expression while aware that the reality will always elude

them. I can attempt comprehension, but all I have is a single image; and even if I assemble many images what results is just a fuller, but never a complete, understanding. The certainly of knowledge that was so characteristic of later scholasticism is here replaced with epistemological stance of humility before the actuality of a human encounter with the divine. While such a 'principle of theological incompleteness' is often affirmed as a limiting notion within theology – one has but to recall the tales retold to generations of students of a child telling Augustine that he has as much chance of emptiness the sea into a hole as Augustine has of understanding the trinity or the legend of the exhausted Aquinas describing his works as but straw in comparison with reality – it is equally liable to be sidelined as irrelevant. In our operative theologies we are all too prone to falling back on the mantras of received wisdom as if we have, *de facto*, all the information we need. Moreover, we ignore the human desires for certainty and explicit clarity at our peril: these are desires that are explicit in many of those who make up church congregations – whether they ask 'what does the bible tell us about … ?' or 'why isn't the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sufficient for answers without theologians babbling?' – or implicit in a need to provide comprehensible materials for teaching. Yet succumbing to those desires both vitiates our religious search and creates false securities for which we invariably pay the price later. This approach in *BEM*, in a common document of the churches, serves to make a certain intellectual humility an operational feature of our discussions.

However, viewing theology as a set of collections of glimpses, rather than a comprehensive act of description, has implications for other aspects of our understanding of ourselves as the church or belonging to a particular church. Firstly, no one group can adopt this perspective and then claim an exclusive claim to certainty: we have to be continually open to new formulations. This is a challenge, obviously, to a church with a formal doctrine of infallibility, but it is equally a challenge to those who hold that the sufficiency of scripture is tantamount to its being the

comprehensive source for Christian knowing. Both approaches depend on the whole 'deposit' of revelation being available and the activity of theology being a matter of deductive inference. However, in asserting that the reality is one and that the statements made about it are a series of images, *BEM* commits churches to an inductive approach to doctrine. Theology becomes the on-going activity to formulate and re-formulate what we understand of the reality of baptism which is a part of our existence as Christians. This transforms the ecumenical encounter itself from being some sort of peace-making / arbitration process – which it must be – into a common search for an as yet unfound / undiscovered / not-yet-created theology that will be not only greater than our disagreements, but gradually more adequate, in our situations, to our needs.

It is not clear from many of the commentaries produced by churches in responding to *BEM* that they appreciated the radically new vision of theology inherent in the document. However, the fact that the churches did not draw attention to the approach taken in *BEM* is itself evidence that they are passing from the lawyers' approach to theological evidence that contributed so much to disunity between western Christians.

An exegetical hermeneutic

The paragraph, as befits a document produced against the backdrop of the Reformations' appeal to 'the scriptures,' contains a veritable chain of references to the New Testament. However, the way we are to relate the churches' understanding of a ritual within their contemporary reality – that they baptise people – to that body of quotations, and by implication the whole known as 'the bible,' is very different from how that relationship was understood in the past and perhaps also the way some churches would construe it today.

Let us imagine that relationship in three different ways: First, we could imagine that the texts cited constitute 'what the bible teaches about baptism.' If this is the case, then the

combined body of quotations, as such, constitutes a treatise on the subject: here we have all we need to understand it. It is both complete and defined: and all else is extraneous. Moreover, we can work with it as a comprehensive guide: anything that appears to contradict a part actually contradicts it, and can and should be rejected; likewise, we can combine the insights – treated as propositions – and produce a doctrinally complete analysis of what 'a theology of baptism is and must be.' While this is a simplification of the approach of the sixteenth century, it would not be far from being a description of their confident ambitions as they studied the scriptures.

Second, we could assume that we do not get systematically arranged theologies in the works that come down to us from the first century of the Christian era, but at the same time affirm that we there find all that we need for our understanding. This argument seeks to account for the sufficiency and normativity of 'the Bible' while taking account of modern historical researches which point out that a first-century writer like Paul in Romans, or the later writer 'Deutero-Paul who wrote Ephesians, or the early second-century writer who wrote 1 Peter were not seeking to produce a doctrinal handbook, much less answer problems that emerged in the scholastic environment of a late medieval university. So rather than simply look 'at what the Bible teaches on baptism,' one has to tease out that teaching through careful research. But note what is implicit: if I go to that body of texts – the New Testament – and labour with it, it will reveal what the Church needs to know. This approach often invokes the image of the jigsaw puzzle: we have pieces in our hands before us and we seek to arrange them to produce something more than the pieces: the final picture and then we will experience the satisfaction of 'having it there before us.' It acknowledges that this is a very difficult jigsaw and requires much patience.[15] Indeed, because of all

[15] On the fundamental assumptions of this approach, see Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianity and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1990).

the problems inherent in the evidence (which here, unlike in the first approach, are neither denied nor minimised) it might be imagined that we have a jigsaw but have lost the box-cover so we do not have an image to guide us (and we may have lost the some of the pieces!), but if we struggle long enough, the essential shape will become apparent to us. In short, there is a complete, or at least a sufficiently complete theology, but the difficulties relate not to the source but to the fragmentary nature of our grasp of the source. However, from these remaining fragments of the 'big picture' we can re-construct it (at least in broad outline). Indeed, these reconstructions point to the substantial continuity between that lost picture and some later fairly complete picture possessed by that church.

Because this jigsaw approach takes the fullest account within its theological investigation of the historical problems of the collection known as 'the New Testament' it is often seen as an approach especially linked with the churches of the Reformation and with biblical studies. Moreover, some of its greatest practitioners, such as Oscar Cullmann[16] and Joachim Jeremias,[17] fit that profile. However, by far the most consistent practitioners of this approach have been Roman Catholics as it is the assumption that 'it was there in the beginning and then developed' that underpins 'historical' investigations pursued under the heading of the 'development of doctrine.' This methodology is successful when used, as by J.H. Newman, to show what are considered the legitimate antecedents of a *present* state of affairs.[18] However, when it is pursued with the aim of finding a past situation, then it invariably fails: 'the evidence' is not sufficient to answer the question which is posed using a different set of theological assumptions. That failure of the recent (2019) Vatican commission enquiring into the

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[16] *Baptism in the New Testament* (SCM Press, London 1950).
[17] See, for example, his *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus* (SCM Press, London 1966).
[18] His classic work of 1846 (*An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*) was intended to show that the present state of Catholic belief and piety was not a deviation from an earlier period.

'history' of women deacons is a case in point.[19] Since the question is posed in terms of 'were they ordained?' the investigators look for evidence for this before the notion of ordination emerged: and so the enquiry fails. The quest is renewed again and again, despite recurring failures, because there is an implicit assumption: all is there always, in some way or other, if only we could see it.

The third perspective assumes that a comprehensive understanding of the mysteries of a religion will always elude us. A complete narration is but a rational desire and its pursuit could, indeed, have a distorting effect on what we say. What we have are insights, glimpses, and a willingness 'to work with what we have' with the fullness of truth as a property of the eschaton. We are going forward, and hopefully towards the truth, but truth – and a full, as distinct from an adequate, understanding – cannot be identified with any historical moment. Thus we have the glimpses of the early times (such as we find in the canonical collection), we have further reflections upon them, and we have our attempts today to produce more systematic understandings, but none of these moments is complete. In this approach we do not turn to the New Testament as a touchstone, but as a witness that they, like us, sought out the meaning of baptism in their discipleship. With the second approach this perspective makes full use of historical investigation, but unlike the second approach it is far more limited in its ambitions: it lives with the uncertainties and fractured nature of our understanding. Whereas the second approach was somehow analogous to a jigsaw, this is like having a photo album in which randomly some family snaps have been collected: each gives us a glimpse of a moment, but it is obviously 'not the whole story.'

When we look again at *BEM* we see that it adopts this third approach in looking at baptism: 'The images are many but the reality is one.' The texts are not the pieces of a single

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[19] See Pauliina Pylvänäinen, *Agents in Liturgy, Charity and Communication: The Tasks of Female Deacons in the Apostolic Tradition* [*Studia Traditionis Theologiae* 37] (Brepols, Turnhout 2020).

picture, rather what we have is an assortment of 'images' but the reality is there and greater than all these images. So we must approach the reality with a humble respect: the mystery will remain, and it will always elude our attempts to comprehend it, much less to define it.

An appreciation of praxis and liturgy

The traditional approaches to the sacraments always began with the moment of institution / the scriptures and then saw that mandate carried out in the Church's ministry and worship. This is the legal sequence of an ordinance being made and promulgated, then subsequently being put into effect: it assumes that the former is a cause and not only has an ontological, but, necessarily, an historical priority. Historians have long contested the notion that this theological sequence which answers a theological question should be seen as identical with the actual sequence of events in the lives of the human beings who belonged to the first churches. Those followers of Jesus evolved their practices and then, in reflection and training in those practices, evolved the narratives we now read as their underpinning. While theologically we might affirm that word precedes community actions, historically the practices preceded the words we now have relating to them.

BEM assumes that baptism was a reality practiced in the churches which was then referred to using a variety of images. These acts of imagination did not exhaust any more than they justified the practices; and so we must confront the reality rather than seek a theoretical ideal. Moreover, when we look at baptism in the early churches, just as with other institutions, we find not only a plurality of images but diversity in practices.[20] This has important ecumenical consequences in dealing with historically vexed questions

[20] For the plurality of practices in the churches, see David C. Parker, *The Living Text of the Gospels* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997) in relation to the scriptures, or Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of the Early Liturgy* (SPCK, London 2002 [second ed.]).

such as aspersion as opposed to immersion, or infant as opposed to adult baptism. By placing the priority with practice, which is then reflected in early documentary evidence, we move the discussion away from 'what does the New Testament teach or warrant?' and endless inconclusive arguments over whether '*oikos*' in the story of Cornelius in Acts includes children.[21] If we assume a starting point in the actual practices of Christians – without there being a primordial perfect moment which decides for all time the perfect performance – then we can confront the actual variety of practices and ask which practice, here in our situation, most adequately is a sign of our Christian hope? In this approach we are moving dialogically forward, discovering the way of discipleship, rather than assuming one practice is true, the others false, and then confronted with bitter inter-church arguments because it has become a game of winners and losers.

A paradigm for pastoral engagement

This paper has argued that *BEM* marks a far more significant step forward in our hermeneutic of how the churches today relate to their origins than has been recognised. It is possible, indeed, that this hermeneutical step is of far greater long-term significance than the actual details which were agreed nearly forty years ago: many of them concerning issues that already appear quaint.

But if that is the case, then what we see in *BEM*'s approach regarding baptism has wider implications for those who seek to move forward ecumenically. Its approach can readily be applied to the practice of the eucharistic action by communities of Christians which has a priority over the manner in which they might explain that activity to

[21] Acts 10:1-48 (with special reference to vv. 47-8); the argument ran that since 'they' were baptised, but we are only told of Cornelius expressing faith, that this was baptism of others on the basis of Cornelius' faith and, therefore, could warrant the baptism of infants on the basis of their parents' faith.

themselves and proclaim it as their doctrine.[22] But perhaps most importantly it provides a new way to examine the problems with regard to who may be deacons, presbyters, and bishops in those churches where the question of the admission of women to those ministries is now the major stumbling block both internally and ecumenically.

Few Christians today look to the books of their sacred memories as lawyers searching out precedents, likewise the notion that there was a past 'golden age' which we simply reproduce is ever less attractive, but the challenge of hearing the fullness of 'what the Spirit is saying to the churches' remains. That is a call for us to use our imaginations in reflection on faithful practice, knowing the realities of which we speak are always beyond us.

[22] See Thomas O'Loughlin, *Eating Together, Becoming One: Taking Up Pope Francis's Call to Theologians* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN 2019)71-83 which uses *BEM*'s approach to baptism as its starting point.